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AUTHOR Masalski, Kathleen Woods
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ABSTRACT

Currently, there is a controversy in Japan about textbook treatments of Japanese military actions during World War II. This digest examines: (1) the importance of history textbooks in schools in Japan and the United States; (2) the context of history textbook controversies in Japan; (3) the current issues and contending positions in the Japanese history textbook controversies; and (4) the lessons and implications of the textbook controversies in Japan for educators in the United States. (BT)

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Kathleen Woods Masalski

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History Textbook Controversies in Japan

By Kathleen Woods Masalski

There is an ongoing controversy in Japan about textbook treatments of Japanese military actions during World War II. This Digest examines (1) the importance of history textbooks in schools in Japan and the United States; (2) the context of history textbook controversies in Japan; (3) the current issues and contending positions in the Japanese history textbook controversies; and (4) the lessons and implications of the textbook controversies in Japan for educators in the United States.

The Importance of History Textbooks in Japan and the United States. The controversy surrounding the adoption of middle school history textbooks in Japan raises this question: why are textbooks, history textbooks in particular, important enough to fight about?

Textbooks are used pervasively in Japanese and American schools. They are the dominant instructional materials in most classrooms. Thus, the content of textbooks looms large in the teaching and learning of history and other core subjects of the curriculum.

American historians Laura Hein and Mark Selden (2000, 3-4) tell us that "people fight over textbook content because education is so obviously about the future, reaches so deeply into society, and is directed by the state."

Japanese historian Richard H. Minear says "As a practicing historian, I encounter at every turn the power textbooks exercise over my students' minds. ... And our students believe absolutely what they read in textbooks"
<http://vcn.bc.ca/alpha/ienaga/support.htm#Minear>.

Context of the Textbook Controversies in Japan. In Japan, each public and private school selects one history textbook from a list of seven or eight authorized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho*) every four years. This screening process lasts one year. Japanese textbook companies submit manuscripts to the Ministry of Education, whose appointed committees examine them according to prescribed criteria. The Ministry offers the textbook companies opportunities to revise their drafts, and copies of the Ministry-approved manuscripts are then available for consideration by the local districts.

In 1965 Saburo Ienaga, a prominent historian, filed the first of his three lawsuits against the Ministry of Education charging that the process of textbook approval was unconstitutional and illegal. The Ministry had rejected Ienaga's history textbook because it contained "too many illustrations of the 'dark side' of the war, such as an air raid, a city left in ruins by the atomic bomb, and disabled veterans" (Nozaki and Inokuchi 2000, 108). Ienaga's second suit two years later also involved the issue of constitutionality and focused on points related to Ienaga's characterization of Japan's foundation myths and a description of the 1941 Japan-USSR neutrality pact.

In 1982 the screening process in Japan became a diplomatic issue when the media of Japan and neighboring countries extensively covered changes required by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry had ordered Ienaga to remove critical language in his history textbook, insisting that he write of the Japanese army's "advance into" China instead of its "aggression in" China and of "uprising among the Korean people" instead of the "March First Independence Movement." Pressure applied by China and Korea succeeded in getting the Ministry to back down and resulted in the Ministry adding a new authorization criterion: that textbooks must show understanding and international harmony in their treatment of modern and contemporary historical events involving neighboring Asian countries (Murai 2001, 28).

Saburo Ienaga's lawsuits lasted 30 years. Although in 1997—in response to Ienaga's third lawsuit instituted in 1986—the Supreme Court of Japan unanimously upheld the Ministry's right to continue screening textbooks, Saburo Ienaga and his fellow critics enjoyed a partial victory.

The Current Situation. A conservative movement toward reform in the Japanese history curriculum was initiated in the early 1990s by Nobukatsu Fujioka and his Liberal View of History Study Group. Fujioka, a professor of education at Tokyo University, set out to "correct history" by emphasizing a "positive view" of Japan's past and removing from textbooks any reference to matters associated with what he calls "dark history."

By early 2000 Fujioka and his group had joined with others to form the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, now headed by Kanji Nishio. It is the Society's textbook, *The New History Textbook* (one of eight junior high school history textbooks authorized by the Ministry of Education in April 2001), that has caused much debate in Japan over the past year. Nishio summarized the views of the Society in an article in the August 2001 *Japan Echo*, a bimonthly journal of opinion on a wide range of topics of current interest in Japan. The article maintained that rather than asserting the Society members' personal views of history, the textbook aims to restore common sense to the teaching of the subject. Nishio insisted that "history stop being treated like a court in which the figures and actions of the past are called to judgment" (Nishio 2001, 33).

Widespread protests against the textbook erupted in Japan, China, and North and South Korea. In December 2000, reacting to a draft textbook circulated by the Society and shown on national television, a long list of Japanese historians and history

Kathleen Woods Masalski is the Projects Director for the Five College Center for East Asian Studies at Smith College in Northampton, MA. She was the 2000 recipient of the John E. Thayer III Award for a lifetime of work furthering understanding between the United States of America and Japan.

educators expressed misgivings about the content of *The New History Textbook* and its rendering of Japan's past. Their complaints centered around the text's presentation of Japan's foundation myths as historical fact and its characterization of wars launched by modern Japan as wars to liberate Asia.

The intellectuals' appeal to people inside and outside Japan appeared on the Internet prior to authorization of the textbook by the Ministry. Following authorization, their voices were joined by an international group of scholars. They aimed to "ensure that textbooks are consistent with values of peace, justice, and truth." It declared *The New History Textbook* "unfit as a teaching tool because it negates both the truth about Japan's record in colonialism and war and the values that will contribute to a just and peaceful Pacific and world community." More information about the scholars' claim is available on their Web site, which is maintained by the Center for Research and Documentation on Japan's War Responsibility <http://www.jca.apc.org/JWRC/center/english/index-english.htm>.

Reactions in China and Korea took various forms. China Radio International announced that the Chinese government and people were "strongly indignant about and dissatisfied with the new Japanese history textbook for the year 2002 compiled by right-wing Japanese scholars." Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Banzao warned that the Chinese people would not accept the interpretation of wartime events put forth by the new textbook <http://web12.cri.com.cn/english/2001/Apr/13714.htm>. An article in the August 25, 2001 issue of *Korea Now*, a biweekly magazine published in English, reported that as Seoul prepared to celebrate its Liberation Day (celebrating Korea's liberation from Japanese colonization and the establishment of the Republic of Korea) on August 15, angry Koreans continued to stage anti-Japan protests ignited by the new Japanese "textbooks that allegedly gloss over atrocities by Japanese soldiers during World War II."

Under the Japanese system, local school authorities determine whether the new textbook is to be used in district classrooms. On August 15, the deadline for school districts to make their selections, Associated Press writer Mari Yamaguchi reported in *The Japan Times* that the new textbook had been shunned and that nearly all of Japan's school districts had rejected it.

Lessons for Americans. As a mirror for Americans, Japan's textbook controversy may shed light on what could happen here if the dominant narrative, our "official" story of our past, were challenged by a counter narrative, one that threatens to alter or even replace a conventional textbook narrative. Japan lost the war that is the center of the textbook controversy. American teachers and students might ask how that fact has influenced Japan's textbook narrative. Does the victor's interpretation of the past differ from that of the vanquished? For example, James Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, points out that most American history textbooks published before 1990 omitted all the important photographs of the Vietnam War (1995, 241).

Many Americans see Japan as a harmonious, one-dimensional society; the fact that teachers brought this textbook controversy—which involved lawsuits supported by tens of thousands of Japanese people—to the attention of their students may help diminish that stereotype. At least two individuals are prominent in the textbook controversy in Japan. By introducing Saburo Ienaga and Nobukatsu Fujioka to students, American teachers add a human dimension to Japan's textbook controversy. For years Japan's past adversaries, its Asian neighbors, have scrutinized Japan's history textbooks. With their students, American teachers might examine American textbook narratives while imagining that Mexican, Japanese, and Vietnamese scholars and students are reading over their shoulders as they teach and learn about American interpretations of the war with Mexico, the war in the Pacific, or the war in Vietnam. Finally, American teachers might also consider presenting this passionate debate in Japan as an example for Americans to follow in constructively criticizing and improving textbooks in the United States.

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